

READING POEMS FOR REVOLUTIONS IN 19TH CENTURY
LATIN AMERICA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA:
JOSÉ RIZAL AND JOSÉ MARTÍ

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A contemporary reading of literary works written by late 19th century revolutionary poets has to do with many variables. The first to come to mind naturally is the author's political involvement. And in this respect, things are in this paper much more than clear. José Martí is generally considered as a representative of a "culture seeking to become independent of imperialism"¹ and José Rizal's novel *Noli me tangere* has "made him the symbol of Philippine resistance to the colonial rule"². But it might be something different that could prove their proto-revolutionary literary work. It is not our intention to do a survey of how their works are perceived today, since they are both national popular recognized heroes for Cuba and the Philippines, and these culturally powerful positions may stir, of course, debates of political nature. The importance of these two revolutionary that also were writers, though, rests in the literary world that they both have greatly influenced³. Instead of trying to debate over their role in the revolutions that shattered the colonial world, we would rather think of a short inventory of poetic ideas that are overtly influenced by

¹ SAID, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993, p.214.

² ANDERSON, Benedict. *Under Three Flags. Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination*. London: Verso, 2005, p.6.

³ "To speak today of Gabriel García Márquez, Salman Rushdie, Carlos Fuentes, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, and many others like them is to speak of a fairly novel emergent culture unthinkable without the earlier work of partisans like C.L.R. James, George Antonius, Edward Wilmont Blyden, W.E.B. Du Bois, José Martí." (SAID, 1993: 243).

revolutionary ideals. However, before analyzing their poetical discourses, let us reflect about the connection between a writer and the upmost fundamental social and political change that always is a revolution.

The second half of the 19th century was a key period in which the notions of poet and revolutionary came as one. José Martí was born in 1853 and José Rizal in 1861. If we think of the seventh decade of the century, the French revolution was almost three generations away, the anarchist movement of the Russian Decembrists was thirty-five years closer and the 1848 revolution was shifting into a living memory for almost everybody in Europe. The tidal wave of these important events was about to turn on the colonies as well, although it may be that challenges of authority were different in nature when we speak of Europe and of the colonies of European empires. Still, their substance, which is very often distilled in literary works, remained basically the same: the affirmation of a national identity, freedom from the oppression of *Ancien Regime* institutions as absolute monarchy or Church extensive power and the appearance of a new enlightened bourgeoisie (for whom writers like José Martí and José Rizal were forefront figures), a class that took as a mission the education of the illiterate and impoverished “masses”.⁴

“Masses” and “revolutions” were much too often associated in the last two centuries. However, the two notions do not even remotely belong to the same paradigm. It is the discourse of revolutionaries that gathers and often “invented” the “masses”, while the revolution *per se* is the hero’s realm. Whether the revolutionary discourse is uttered from the bonnet of a truck in an industrial area or it is laid down in words in a manuscript, it still is a product of the intellect. But it is undeniable that the former is a by-product of the later, formed out of the later, which consists of poems, novels or theoretical writings, all of them weapons of their own kind. Let us say that there is no revolution without ideology, and that there is no revolution leader with no influence whatsoever from a previous

⁴ PERNOUD, Régine, *Histoire de la bourgeoisie en France*. Paris: Seuil, 1962-1964, 2 vols.

revolutionary writer or philosopher. We have to divide, again, between revolutionary heroes, who are politically active individuals and who commit themselves to the cause of overthrowing a conservative government in office, and revolutionary thinkers (i.e. writers and philosophers) who, for the revolution, play the role of apostles for the Christian faith.⁵

It would be inappropriate to bring into discussion the vulgar, but still very successful breed of demagogues (or populists?), those who strive to become revolutionary heroes. The term “demagogue” is normally derogative, but it is undeniable that along 19th century they tried to become a sort of revolutionary heroes of their own time. Their technique to rally the masses was simple: a discourse that mixes up elementary truths, transparent innuendos or even straightforward attacks on the government in office and a lot of popular promises. But the main ideas that governed their discourses still were the emancipation of the masses, freedom and equality. A careful analysis of these incendiary discourses reveals the fact that even nowadays the large majority of the political discourses are spiced up with notions such as “freedom”, “righteousness” or “time for action”. In the end, as a finishing touch, the term “democracy” is quoted and, if not, it is surely implied. All of these paradigms are rooted in late 18th and late 19th century writings, namely the *Rousseauist* enlightenment and the Franco-British-German Romanticism.

During a revolution, it would be quite unnatural to fight for something else than “democracy”. After all, it is the Greek notion of “people” that both revolutionary and demagogues in transit to revolutionaries try to state as being central for their political platforms. Even the 19th century Russian anarchists (the Decembrists), an extreme faction of the revolutionary type, fought for a total destruction of the present world in hope of a new fairer and civic nation-wide that would come out of the ashes of the former one.⁶ It is not different from the Taiping Revolution in China led by Hong Xiuquan (1814–1864), presenting

⁵ NESS, Immanuel (ed.). *The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest: 1500 to the Present*. Malden, MA: Wiley & Sons, 2009.

⁶ RABOW-EDLING, Susanna. “The Decembrists and the Concept of a Civic Nation”, in: *Nationalities Papers* 35/2 (May 2007): 369–391.

himself as brother of Jesus and merging traditional peasant millenarism with Genesis prophecies to propose a new realm of justice and collective fraternity, generous ideas also spread out by revolutionary poems transformed in popular anthems and songs.⁷ The point of convergence for revolutionary discourses of all kinds in the most diverse geographies is that people, even through their own dramatic destruction, deserve a better faith. Actually, the two principles by which Aristotle precisely identifies the basis of all demagogic discourses: the government of the majority and freedom⁸.

More than two thousand years after Aristotle, the age of revolutions was brewing. The flag had been raised during the 18th century. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of those revolutionary philosophers (of the same caliber as Plato, Aristotle or the later Marx) to claim the throne for the modern revolutionary movement. He was not even inclined to take up arms, to gather an army and to overthrow a form of government or another. On the contrary, in his writings, he gave full power to the legislative and submitted the executive to it. His mid-eighteenth century theory of the “natural right” quickly became famous. It actually triggered a wave of enthusiasm and solidarity between those who were thinking about their own kind. The Enlightenment, born from a novel rationalist-like thinking and spread by means of the fashionable gathering of friends, paved the way to the famous 1789 French Revolution and to the string of revolutions in Europe, spreading in the 19th century to the American colonies of European powers.⁹

It would be quite far-fetched to consider that Greek philosophy was only a product of dialectic approach of reality. The same, we could not compare the

⁷ “Holding the Universe in the hand,/ I slay the evil, spare the righteous, and relieve the suffering of the people./ My eyes see through beyond the west, the north, the rivers, and the mountains,/ My sounds shake the east, the south, the Sun, and the Moon./ The glorious sword of authority was given by Lord,/ Poems and books are evidences that praise Yahweh in front of Him./ Taiping [perfect Peace] unifies the World of Light,/ The domineering air will be joyous for myriads of thousand years” (LEE, Joseph Tse-Hei, *The Bible and the Gun: Christianity in South China, 1860-1900*. New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 16-17).

⁸ ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, Part IX.

⁹ GODECHOT, Jacques. *France and the Atlantic revolution of the eighteenth century, 1770-1799*. New York: Free Press, 1965.

Gymnasium with the 19th century European intellectual gathering spaces that, bearing names like “the friends of the country” or “savant society”, were the actual brains of revolutions. Whether they were part of a society of friends that, in some cases, was synonymous with a free-masonry lodge or just solitary thinkers, among the fore-fathers of the revolutionary intellectuals, we can find, in the eve of the 19th century, an important number of young, enthusiastic and proud writers. They provided the breeding ground for the ideas that would overthrow governments. Thus, one of their favorite past-time was to discuss the basic principles of which society functioned at that time. And those moments of meditation and dialectical analysis proved to be the basic ingredients for the revolutionary’s gunpowder. As Jaques Godechot put it, this kind of activities “contributed to the diminishing the prestige of the most venerated authorities: the kings, the churches, the aristocrats. Everywhere, they “undermined” the Former Regime and contributed to its fall”¹⁰.

Two of these “they” were José Martí in Cuba and José Rizal in the Philippines. Both are now National heroes and both opposed the colonial Spanish regime, then only a fragment of the former empire, and both lived during the second half of the 19th century. Any further similarities between these two poets and prose-writers could be revelatory, but such an approach would also put a distance between the authors and their literary work. Let us take the narrowest path and navigate the deep waters of literature. The question we would like to find an answer to is as follows: What are the revolutionary poetic ideas that both these important national symbols put forward in their poems? A minimal list of poetic ideas common to both Rizal and Martí would, no doubt about it, speak of the most intimate nature of their political agenda.

Molded since the Renaissance, the “idea” comes to be defined by Tasso as a transcendent truth that is reflected into poetry as a concept.¹¹ From this point

¹⁰ GODECHOT, 1965 : 99.

¹¹ BRIGGS, Helen M. “Tasso's Theory of Epic Poetry”, in: *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct., 1930), pp. 457-473; TASSO, Torquato. *Discorsi dell'arte poetica*. Roma: Biblioteca dei Classici italiani di Giuseppe Bonghi, 1999, Discorso primo.

on, the Romantic movement in Europe has innovated a new kind of poetry, that would appear under the name of *Gedankenlyrik*, or, in other words, a “poetry of ideas” or a “philosophical poetry”.¹² Trying to identify these “poetical ideas” would naturally help to answer the questions regarding the revolutionary profile of Rizal and Martí. Still, poetry is not the only source for such a forensic study of literature. The novels of Rizal and Martí supply a wealth of themes which could do more for the understanding of the political environment in which the authors lived and their own viewpoints on society. A study of the poetical ideas in poetry and of the themes in prose should, though, take into account the fact that art is as much transitive (in the sense of putting forth a message that was elaborated by means of thinking) as it is reflexive. And this reflexive capacity of a literary text is what helps us draw the most accurate portrait of our two revolutionary heroes.

The novels are generally looked upon as being transitive, as a result of the narrative. The authors may be found in echoes coming from the narrative voice or from one of the main characters. Poetry, though, is generally considered as a “mirror of the soul”, being thus more suitable for a reflexive evaluation. Both Rizal and Martí have written novels and poetry, and it is in the latter that we can easily identify themes of importance for an afterward hand-sketched portrait. Whether this portrait will fit other late Romantic revolutionary figures or not is of no importance for the present paper. And it is also true that inside a novel, which can be a narrative sub-species of the epic genre, there are elements of style that border with poetry. Still, it is the way we perceive the poems that may uncover some themes out of which we could identify the poets’ innermost obsessions and intimate convictions that formed the basis of a later interpretation of their text as revolutionary writings.

Jose Rizal’s sonnet “To the Phillipines” speaks of a “cultured West”.¹³ The poem, in itself, is an ode to the Motherland, which is compared to an intensely cultivated Romantic icon, the Moon. Beyond the already present melancholy of

¹² MATHIEU, Gustave & STERN, Guy (eds.). *Introduction to German poetry*. New York: Dover Publications, 1987, p. 149.

¹³ A traditional version of the poem available at <http://www.joserizal.ph/pmo4.html>; and a modern reading at <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/to-the-philippines/>.

this symbol, Rizal makes use of another element associated with the moon in the Romantic symbolic code: the goddess. Thus, the image of the motherland is painted in shades of dark blue and grey, as she is a goddess that seems to have been chained by an unknown curse. What is, then, the place of the “cultured West” in all this? It happens to be very much the opposite of what it enunciates. The poem seems to put up a very laudatory tone towards the Western civilization. In fact, the intention is exactly the opposite. Although the West might be “cultural”, it also is put in a position that speaks of its heartlessness:

*The cultured West adores her smile
And the frosty Pole her flow’red attire.*

Rizal uses, here, a couple of similes that are not at all symmetrical, but rather belong to the same paradigm. The West adores the joy of goddess motherland and the Pole adores the flowers. Both adore what they lack. The West is contaminated by the qualities of the “frosty Pole” and comes out as icy cold, as heartless.

Another poem, *Our mother tongue*, speaks of the Tagalog language as “akin to Latin, to English, Spanish”.¹⁴ An illuminist idea, the knowledge of one’s language is much more than the advantage over the illiterate co-nationals:

*Because by its language one can judge
A town, a barrio, and kingdom;
And like any other created thing
Every human being loves his freedom.*

As a true poet, José Rizal knows that a poetic idea needs to be underlined more than once in the same poem, using different means of expression. This is how, alongside the “joy of Philippines in front of the icy cold West” from the previous poem, “Our Mother Tongue” speaks of the freedom to use a cultural

¹⁴ <http://www.joserizal.ph/pmo5.html>.

language properly by which means the Philippines become equals to any Western nation. This poetic idea is one that seemed very audacious at a time when empires were still considered as beacons of civilization and the colonies mere trading facilities.

More audacious still is another poetic idea that sends the reader to one myth that is central to romanticism and especially to Rousseau's writings: *le bon sauvage*. One of the most famous quotes from his work is, as we all know, the following generous and paternalist principle: "La nature a fait l'homme heureux et bon, mais la société le déprave et le rend misérable".¹⁵ For Rousseau, a luxurious life leads to the corruption of the soul. Thus, it was very important for the romantic poet to return to nature and to remind the others that the only age of truth, the age of childish innocence, was long gone for the Western civilization. Rizal travels this romantic poetic path in his "Memories of My Town":¹⁶

*Oh, yes! With uncertain pace
I trod your forest lands,
And on your river banks
A pleasant fun I found;
At your rustic temple I prayed
With a little boy's simple faith
And your aura's flawless breath
Filled my heart with joy profound.
Saw I god in the grandeur
Of your woods which for centuries stand;
Never did I understand
In your bosom what sorrows were;
While I gazed on your azure sky
Neither love nor tenderness
Failed me, 'cause my happiness
In the heart of nature rests there.*

¹⁵ <http://www.etudier.com/dissertations/La-Nature-%C3%A0-Fait-l'Homme-Bon/>.

¹⁶ <http://www.joserizal.ph/pmo6.html>.

There is no doubt about the fact that in this poem of “memories”, Rizal chooses another technique that playing with similes or epithetes: he accumulates information for a final very rich poetical idea. The forests as temples and the child as the faithful believer will come together in the last fragment of the poem, where the adult poet becomes conscious of his self-inflicted but implacable sin of having lost childhood, these places of serenity and belief are, in the same time, a place governed by a genius of good. For many Romantics, God was up too high, intangible and inert.

*Tender childhood, beautiful town,
Rich fountain of happiness,
Of harmonious melodies,
That drive away my heart,
Bring back my gentle hours
As do the birds when the flow'rs
Would again begin to blow!
But, alas, adieu! E'er watch
For your peace, joy and response,
Genius of good who kindly dispose
Of his blessings with amour;
It's for thee my fervent pray'rs,
It's for thee my constant desire
Knowledge ever to acquire
And may God keep your candour!*

Opposed to the political rulers, the true forces in the physical world were of transcendental origin: the geniuses. Their temples were the forests and their kingdom was the hearts of children. Translated in the language of the romantics, the society was formed of deprived and miserable individuals, and that society he refers to clearly is the Western society. The underlined message of this poem is

that the Philipino people have got a very important advantage over the Westerners, and that is that they have kept their own original candour.

These important poetical ideas, the warmth of the Philippino hearts, the beauty of the Tagalog language and the candour of “indigenous” people are, in themselves, a manifest. And, as this manifest advocates for the freedom of the spirit that the Philipinos already have, it implies that the freedom of the political power is to follow. One may verify this in the upmost famous Rizal poem “To the Philippine Youth”, where submission to the authority of the Spanish seems to be unequivocal.¹⁷

*See that in the ardent zone
The Spaniard, where shadow stand,
Doth offer a shining crown
With wise and merciful hand
To the son of this Indian land.*

The message is clear, as the imperial power takes up the role of a father figure to the “Indian” children. Towards the end of the poem, after arduous praising of the youth’s ingenuity, their vibrant hearts and their power to create, José Rizal adds what was necessary for a true revolution. Although it looks like the poem is just about “the artist”, there are some symbols that account for the true nature of the poet, that of the revolutionary writer. He is blessed by the “genius”, he awaits “crowning”, he is the one to “spread the fame”. He is, finally, the leader of the enthusiastic youth:

*Run! For genius’ sacred flame
Awaits the artist’s crowning
Spreading far and wide the fame
Throughout the sphere proclaiming
With trumpet the mortal’s name.*

¹⁷ <http://www.joserizal.ph/pm14.html>.

*Oh, joyful, joyful day,
The Almighty blessed be
Who, with loving eagerness
Sends you luck and happiness.*

The “artist” is not really an artist. It fits more the profile of a revolutionary who, influenced by the culture of the West, lucky and famous, would come to put to use what was already announced at the beginning of the poem:

*Lift up your radiant brow,
This day, Youth of my native strand!
Your abounding talents show
Resplendently and grand,
Fair hope of my Motherland!*

The young “artists” will be true artists one day, and that moment would come along only with the liberation, the independence of the Motherland. Centred upon this key idea of Motherland, which is represented as a goddess, Rizal’s poetry goes to length in reorganizing the universe according to a new poetical order. This, in itself, already is a revolutionary idea, as the “genius” governs the world of the Motherland, far away from the icy cold Western civilization. The time for national identity through education seems to have come and, like a true Romantic hero, the poet does nothing but ring the bell that rallies the Philipinos.

Martí’s poems, probably much more than Rizal poetry, have been rallying revolutionaries all over the world, but their way of achieving that is fundamentally different. “Guantanamera” has become, throughout the 20th century, a referential revolutionary anthem. But the lyrics do not cover the original poem. The romantic obsession of death is twofold: death as result of the world’s incapacity to change according to the principles of the romantic hero (in other words, the sacrifice of the poet himself) and death as a sacrifice for a tragic love. Following the Romantic sensibility, as this is what we are precisely thinking

about, one goes from the former revolutionary death for which William Blake formulated the leading principle as “I must create a system or be enslaved by other man’s”,¹⁸ to the latter, very much spread through the Goethe’s *Sturm und Drang* movement, which almost advertised the suicide for love in that famous German poet *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.¹⁹ Either way, Martí is a romantic hero, as he goes very close to these extremes in “A Sincere Man Am I” (*Yo soy un hombre sincero*),²⁰ the poem to become famous with the help of the well-known *Guantanamo* song:

*I have known a man to live
With a dagger at his side,
And never once the name give
Of she by whose hand he died.*

As when the poet’s voice come to speak of his own faith, he chooses to make another sacrifice, much more important than the flesh and bones of the mortal body:

*I know when fools are laid to rest
Honor and tears will abound,
And that of all fruits, the best
Is left to rot in holy ground
Without a word, the pompous muse
I’ve set aside, and understood:
From a withered branch, I choose,
To hang my doctoral hood.*

¹⁸ BLAKE, William. *Jerusalem. The Emanation of The Giant Albion* [<http://www.blakearchive.org/>].

¹⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sorrows_of_Young_Werther.

²⁰ <http://www.inspirationalstories.com/poems/a-sincere-man-am-i-verse-i-jose-marti-poems/>.

Jose Marti's poems border very much with the style of Novalis, a German writer whose first and foremost goal was to relate philosophy with high-ranking poetry. What resulted was the "progressive universal poetry", a very successful trend in the 19th century. Not speaking overtly of national identity, of political issues and inequities in the real world, the poetry that was generated by this literary trend tried to fight with other means that direct accusations of the Former Regime: "We are on a mission", Novalis said, "we are called upon to educate the earth".²¹ And the ideal that the Novalis-influenced poets tried to put forward was that of a Golden Age, a paradisaical Age very much influenced by Platon's world of pure ideal substances. The Golden Age was not a utopian land yet, but it paved the way for further development during the late 19th and 20th centuries.

No romantic poet is a romantic hero without a sacrifice. Martí chooses to underline this as a return to nature. He is influenced by the *rousseauist* ideas as well, but in a different way. In his poem "I wish to leave the world",²² the sacrifice to the world is a "metempsychosis" of the poet awaiting the Golden Age to come:

*I wish to leave the world
By its natural door;
In my tomb of green leaves
They are to carry me to die.
Do not put me in the dark
To die like a traitor;
I am good, and like a good thing
I will die with my face to the sun.*

The idea of a traitor in a middle of a poem strongly influenced by the very popular 1800 Novalis poem (*Hymns to the night*) is not fortuitous. Martí is a poet with a mission, he is almost a poet-soldier. His aim is to educate and,

²¹ NOVALIS [Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg]. *Blüthenstaub* (1798), fragment n°. 32 [<https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Novalis>].

²² <http://www.poemhunter.com/best-poems/jose-marti/i-wish-to-leave-the-world/>.

through education, to bring the colonial Spanish era to an end. As Alphonse de Lamartine said, “Poets and heroes are on the same race, the latter do what the former conceive”.²³

Rizal and Martí could hardly be compared if we take into account only the style of their poems. Still, the two poets were of the same breed. Even if their writings are so different, their objective was the same: to bring the Spanish colonial domination to an end through education of the masses. The next step, the change of the social order, thought, would be completed by readers a few generations after. They belonged to the Romantic era, when poetry was a subtle vehicle of meaning. And one of the most important poetical ideas was that the colonial order needs to be changed. The poet was, in the time of Rizal and Martí, a poet in its true sense and poetical form was leisure as much as the deep poetical message represented the seed of revolutionary ideas. When the “job” of the poet was completed, the heroes of the revolutions were just being born. Martí was more than poetically right when he wrote “I have a white rose to tend” (*Cultivo una rosa blanca*), ²⁴merging through a romantic ethos poetry and resistance, verses and revolution to promise a new human regeneration, even a generous new human forgiveness:

*I have a white rose to tend
In July as in January;
I give it to the true friend
Who offers his frank hand to me.
And for the cruel one whose blows
Break the heart by which I live,
Thistle nor thorn do I give:
For him, too, I have a white rose.*

²³ <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/alphonsede390412.html>.

²⁴ <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/i-have-a-white-rose-to-tend-verse-xxxix/>.

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